

Unraveled Everything

2 Samuel 21

August 9, 2020

Rev. Kelley L. Becker

A good part of my week was spent talking with parents and teachers and students about what back to school is going to look like this year. In their voices I have heard everything from excitement to dread, hope to anxiety, frustration, fear, sadness, and anger. You name it, people are feeling it. And who can blame them? Like so many aspects of 2020, “Back to School 2020” is a bit of a mess. Teachers are concerned about keeping their students, themselves, and their own families safe. They want their students to learn and they want everyone to be safe. Students want to be with their friends. They want to go back to school, but they wonder what it will be like to have to wear a mask all day and maintain social distancing in classrooms that were not designed for that. Parents are feeling the stress of the responsibility they have for these young humans who, it turns out, did not come with instruction books. Parents need to work, but they wonder if it’s too risky. They feel judgment from all sides, caught between choices, none of them perfect. And let’s face it, fear and uncertainty do not bring out the best in any of us.

These conversations have reminded me of more than one occasion in my own life when the responsibilities of parenting and the weight of making hard decisions made for anxious times. When my oldest son was a senior in high school, he suffered a concussion while playing ice hockey. The doctor told him to rest for a week and then I had to make the hard decision about whether or not he could return to the sport, which, at the time, was his passion. I remember feeling angry as the other parents and even his coach tried to pressure me to let him play again. I also remember that it all made me feel like the proverbial “mama bear,” protecting my cub. It’s how we are wired. That wiring has been helping the offspring of many species survive for thousands of years.

Today’s story is about a “mama bear” who endured the unthinkable, the thing that everyone who has ever loved a child hopes they never have to face, the death of a child. But it is worse than that, she faced the death of two children who died as the result of unspeakable injustice. This mama’s name was Rizpah and her story is told primarily in 2 Samuel 21. My Hebrew Bible professor in seminary, Dr.

Lisa Davison, loves this story and she passed a love for it along to me. If you have never heard this story, once you do, you will never forget it. You won't forget it because it is deeply disturbing and because Rizpah is a truly unforgettable warrior for justice and for the memory of her children. Before I read it, I want to talk for a minute about where we are in the biblical narrative.

The book of 2 Samuel is largely the story of David. It begins with David receiving the news that King Saul and three of his sons, including David's very good friend, Jonathan, have died in battle. Saul fell on his sword to avoid being captured; the others were killed by the Philistines. Rizpah was one of Saul's low-level wives whose life unraveled when she became a widow when Saul died. The fact that she was low-level means that her children were not eligible to inherit anything and had no claim to the throne as a result of Saul's death. It is also the reason the text refers to her as a concubine which is not exactly true. A concubine was more like a mistress; Rizpah was Saul's wife.

Because this plays into Rizpah's story, I will tell you that Saul's and his son's bodies, including David's best friend, Jonathan's body, were never collected for a proper burial. Instead, the power grab began. There was a lot of fighting between those who were loyal to Saul and those who were loyal to David. Eventually, David became king. He was a highly successful and highly regarded leader. He conquered Jerusalem and made it the capital and brought the ark of the covenant to Jerusalem. He essentially created an empire and he was a pretty beloved leader. His personal life, though, was a mess. He did some pretty awful things, some of which have been glossed over, because people like to think of David as a hero. But, like all of us, David was far from perfect and because he had so much power, when he did awful things, they often had devastating consequences for others.

The story of Rizpah happened in the midst of a famine. Famine, in the biblical tradition, was understood as divine punishment; God was mad about something and punished the people by causing the famine. So, like any good and faithful leader, David went before God and asked, "Why the famine?" God told him there had been a covenant between Israel and the Gibeonites that Saul had broken. Way back when Joshua was conquering Jericho, he promised to spare the Gibeonites, but Saul came along and tried to kill them all.

When David heard this, because he wanted the famine to end, he went to the Gibeonites and asked them how he could make it right. What did they want? Land? Money? They didn't want any of that. They wanted human beings, like the human beings that had been killed by Saul. The Gibeonites told David to hand over 7 men from Saul's family so they could impale them. David, without batting an eye, said, "Sounds good." Before we go on, let's look at this decision with a critical eye.

As I mentioned before, we like to think David was a hero. But, what kind of hero/leader agrees to a request like that? To be clear, God told him the famine was because Saul didn't keep the promise to the Gibeonites. God did not say, "Choose some men and offer them to the Gibeonites as an atonement for Saul's sin." David could have refused this request and suggested other options, but he almost seemed eager to do what they asked.

So, who would it be, who would he give them? Jonathan was his best friend, so he would not give them Jonathan's son. He gave them 5 sons that belonged to Saul's daughter, Merab, and Rizpah's 2 sons, Armoni and Mephibosheth. And truthfully, I find it difficult to believe this was an agonizing decision for him, especially since there was no love lost between Saul's family and David. David fought for that throne. Getting rid of 7 men in Saul's family, that could potentially be persuaded to try to make trouble for him, could be nothing but good for David. He turned the 7 men over to the Gibeonites who impaled them on a mountain during the first days of the harvest. Up to now, all of the action in the story centered on powerful men making decisions that affected people who had far less power.

Can you imagine how those mothers felt when they were told their sons had been chosen to be sacrificed? Literally, their whole world came unraveled in an instant. How helpless and sad and angry they must have felt. The story doesn't tell us how Saul's daughter, Merab, responded to losing 5 sons, but it does tell us about Rizpah.

This is 2 Samuel 21:10-14:

¹⁰ Then Rizpah the daughter of Aiah took sackcloth, and spread it on a rock for herself, from the beginning of harvest until rain fell on them from the heavens; she did not allow the birds of the air to come on the bodies by day, or the wild

animals by night. ¹¹ When David was told what Rizpah daughter of Aiah, the concubine of Saul, had done, ¹² David went and took the bones of Saul and the bones of his son Jonathan from the people of Jabesh-gilead, who had stolen them from the public square of Beth-shan, where the Philistines had hung them up, on the day the Philistines killed Saul on Gilboa. ¹³ He brought up from there the bones of Saul and the bones of his son Jonathan; and they gathered the bones of those who had been impaled. ¹⁴ They buried the bones of Saul and of his son Jonathan in the land of Benjamin in Zela, in the tomb of his father Kish; they did all that the king commanded. After that, God heeded supplications for the land.

Rizpah, like so many other women in the biblical narrative, had no power; she was completely beholden to the decisions of the men around her and it was worse for her because she was a widow. She had inherited nothing from Saul's death. And her king, the one with all the power, clearly did not care about her or her sons. They were all pawns moved about at his whim. After Rizpah's sons died, their bodies were left on the mountain to essentially rot. David, though he had sent them to their death, presumably for the common good, to end the famine, made no move to get them and bury them properly. Rizpah had no power to protect them from death, but she was not going to watch their bodies desecrated. I can't wrap my mind around what this would be like, to be grieving the death of your children, but to have to physically protect their bodies too. For maybe as long as 6 months, she stayed on her rock, chasing away birds and animals that tried to feed on the bodies of her children.

Can you even imagine? When it was cold at night and in the heat of the day, she was there, yelling at the animals to stay away, throwing rocks and waving sticks at the birds. Every day, all day long, she was there, forced to look at the bodies of her dead sons. It would have been easier to go home, to convince herself there was nothing she could do. It have to think it would have been easier not to have to look at them. Nevertheless, she persisted. She was there. She slept, ate and toileted there. She remained steadfast, protecting her children, bearing witness to the injustice that had taken their lives and was stealing their dignity even in death. And still, the story tells us, the famine remained.

But finally, after months of what was both a very public expression of grief and a protest against injustice, David noticed Rizpah and suddenly something in his mind and heart clicked. In a commentary on Rizpah's story, Brite Divinity School

Hebrew Bible Professor, Dr. Wilda C. Gafney writes, “Moved by her actions, David retrieves the unburied bones of Saul and Jonathan---whom David loved as his own soul and more than women, but couldn’t be bothered to bury---from the people who took them when they had been left to rot. He gives them a proper burial, along with the sons of Rizpah and the sons of Merab.” Then, only when David had finally done the right thing, the just thing, did the famine end.

(Wilda C. Garney. *Womanist Midrash: A Reintroduction to Women of the Torah and the Throne*. Louisville, KY: Westminster Knox Press, 2017. 200-1)

As I said, this story is incredibly disturbing. It’s disturbing because the idea that someone or someone(s) in power would sacrifice real human beings, other people’s children, to benefit their own interests is so far removed from our reality, right? I wish that was true. The truth is it’s disturbing because this storyline is playing out in our world today with different characters, but the same deep, disturbing injustice and pain. Maybe people aren’t being impaled and their bodies left on a mountain, but there are mothers weeping, and grieving their children’s unjust, senseless deaths all over the world and even right here in our nation. What stories come to mind? In what ways are people in power sacrificing other people’s children today?

Do you see it in the pictures of immigrants and refugees, imprisoned while the owners of for-profit prisons get richer and richer, using their money to lobby politicians?

<https://www.nytimes.com/2018/10/01/us/prisons-immigration-detention.html>

<https://represent.us/action/private-prisons/>

Do you see it when churches and even politicians preach a message of hate the sin, love the sinner in the face of statistics that say LGBTQ+ youth are 5 times more likely to attempt suicide than heterosexual youth? Bad theology and the fusion of that theology to politics is killing our children.

<https://www.thetrevorproject.org/resources/preventing-suicide/facts-about-suicide/>

Do you see it in the video of George Floyd begging for his mama as he was killed in the middle of the street in Minneapolis? Or in Michael Brown’s or David McAtee’s bodies left in the street for hours after they were killed?

<https://www.cnn.com/2020/06/01/us/george-floyd-three-videos-minneapolis/index.html>

Do you see it in the disparity in our criminal justice system between the length of sentences for people of color versus white people who have been convicted of the exact same offense?

<https://www.sentencingproject.org/publications/un-report-on-racial-disparities/>

Do you see it in the willingness of politicians, who have never served in the military, to so quickly send other people's children off to fight wars, while their own children join fraternities and start their lucrative careers?

You can probably think of more examples. The story of Rizpah reminds us that we cannot let violence against anybody's child go unchecked or be swept under the rug. People with power should not have the power to use other human beings to get rich, further their own political ambitions or elevate their own righteousness. Rizpah reminds us that there will be times when we will be a protest of 1 and that should not deter us from protesting, using our voices, refusing to accept that "It is what it is." I was reminded this week of the words of my friend, Sarah Cunningham, founder of the pro-LGBTQ+ organization, Free Mom Hugs and mom to her son, Parker, who is gay. She said, "If I don't fight for my son (and his rights) like my hair is on fire, then who will? Friends, if we don't fight, who will?"

There is so much of the world right now that feels completely unraveled by fear and whether we recognize it or not, we are grieving. And we have to give ourselves time to grieve. When we have done that, or maybe as part of our grief, we have to, like Rizpah, find the will to fight for something better for our children and our neighbors' children.

We must fight for justice and hope that the fight itself, the act of doing something, will begin to heal and repair the world and all of creation. There is an activist and doctor named Paul Farmer who has spent his life doing that. He has focused most of his resources on making sure the people in Haiti have access to medical care. He is an inspiring writer and has written a great deal about how, in his work, there is always a next thing, always another mountain, always one more thing that can be done, one more person that needs help. I will leave you with his words that I think would resonate with Rizpah and maybe with you too, "The idea that some lives matter less is the root of all that is wrong in the world." These words will change your life if you will let them. Amen.